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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: CODEL KERRY PRESSES SYRIAN VICE PRESIDENT ON  
SPECIFICS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4(b,d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) In a February 21 meeting with CODEL Kerry, Vice President Faruq al-Shar'a declined to provide specific actions that the SARG wanted from the U.S. to improve the bilateral relationship. Senator Kerry enumerated three measurable ways that Syria could signal its intentions to the Obama Administration: by allowing the Lebanese to have an open, democratic election in June; by helping Special Envoy George Mitchell to sustain a cease fire in Gaza and support a Palestinian national unity government; and by stopping the flow of foreign fighters through Syria to Iraq. The Senator urged Shar'a to persuade Hizballah and Hamas to renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist in exchange for a place at the negotiating table in upcoming peace negotiations. Shar'a was skeptical that the U.S. would accept either a Lebanese or Palestinian unity government that contained Hizballah or Hamas. The Senator asked Shar'a to watch for the Obama Administration's policy on Israeli settlements as a sign of U.S. good faith, and Shar'a expressed concern that settlements in the Golan would also be addressed. Although Shar'a feigned ignorance about foreign fighters transiting Syria en route to Iraq, he acknowledged that the prospects for a sustainable, multi-confessional federal government in Iraq were much brighter than they had been four years ago. End summary.

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We Want to be Friends  
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¶2. (C) Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) John Kerry (D-MA) met with Syrian Vice President Faruq al-Shar'a on February 21 immediately following the CODEL's two-hour meeting with President Bashar Asad. Shar'a commended Senator Kerry for engaging President Asad in a "lengthy discussion" of U.S.-Syrian relations, and for spending a night in Syria. Shar'a said that he hoped President Obama would also take the time to "get to know Syria" as Senator Kerry had done. The Ba'ath Party hardliner told the Senator that the U.S. and Syrian governments could "do a lot together" if the bilateral relationship was based on "mutual respect and common interests." He lamented that the Syrian "image" is not very good in the U.S., and said

that the U.S. image is not very good in the Middle East. "You can do a lot to change that perception," he offered, "and we can, too." "We are now adversaries," he continued, "but we want to be friends. The previous administration didn't give us the room to be friends. They almost launched a war here."

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Shar'a Avoids Specifics  
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13. (C) Senator Kerry pressed Shar'a for specific first steps that the Vice President would recommend to improve the relationship. Shar'a responded that the Syrian delegation to the Versailles Conference of 1919 had told the French that they wanted better relations with all Western states after World War I, but they preferred working with the United States. He said that today, Syria still prefers better relations with the U.S., but the U.S. of the 20th century and not the U.S. of the last eight years. He claimed that Syria had only "good intentions" in improving the relationship, and he was confident that President Asad had expressed those good intentions to the Senator.

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So Senator Kerry Provides Them  
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14. (C) In response, Senator Kerry enumerated three measurable ways that Syria could signal its desire for a better relationship: by allowing the Lebanese to have an open, democratic election in June; by helping Special Envoy George

Mitchell to sustain a cease fire in Gaza and support a Palestinian national unity government; and by stopping the flow of foreign fighters through Syria to Iraq.

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Discussion of Lebanon  
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15. (C) Shar'a professed that "we believe in two sovereign states" (Lebanon and Syria) and claimed that Syria did not want to send its army back to Lebanon. "If you aren't pressuring us and we aren't pressuring you," he said, "we will have open borders with Lebanon -- which would greatly improve Lebanon's economy." Senator Kerry acknowledged that the timing of the as-yet-unnamed Syrian ambassador's arrival in Lebanon is a question of Syrian sovereignty, but encouraged the SARG to make measurable progress in other ways. The problem, he told Shar'a, is with Hizballah -- an extremist, militant, religiously-motivated insurrection that has created a virtual state within a state. The Lebanese, he said, just want to be allowed to have an open, democratic process without fear of political assassinations.

16. (C) Shar'a defended Hizballah, saying that Senator Kerry might change his opinion that Hizballah is an extremist organization if he met with Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. "If there is peace, if lands are restored," said Shar'a, "there would be no need for militancy." Senator Kerry countered by asking what Lebanese lands need to be restored. Shebaa Farms, he argued, could be solved in one afternoon if the political will existed. The Senator said that Hizballah had changed its justification for militancy from Israeli occupation of Lebanese lands to Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. The Senator explained that he could never meet with Nasrallah because Hizballah would not renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist. Even Arafat had renounced violence, he said.

17. (C) Shar'a argued that Hizballah's willingness to exchange prisoners of war with Israel was a de facto recognition of Israel's existence. Senator Kerry disagreed, saying that prisoner exchanges demonstrated only a willingness for warring parties to deal with each other. Shar'a concurred, admitting that the exchanges were "just a step." The Senator explained that Hizballah's re-arming with 40,000 rockets

since the August 2006 cease fire had undermined the peace process, to which Shar'a responded, "There is no peace process." Senator Kerry implored the SARG to understand the need to address Israeli security concerns if the Syrians truly wanted peace, or risk a state of perpetual war. Shar'a assured Senator Kerry that Hizballah would disarm, and the Senator urged him to use Syria's influence to disarm Hizballah soon in order to get Hizballah a seat at the negotiating table. Shar'a asked the Senator to "just tell me where you want the table," implying that Syria could make it happen. Senator Kerry responded that Special Envoy George Mitchell is preparing the table, and assured Shar'a that the new Administration knows the border, water and land issues that had held up previous peace negotiations and was confident that, with Syrian support, peace could be achieved.

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Palestinian Unity  
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18. (C) On the subject of Palestinian unity, Senator Kerry urged Shar'a to use Syria's good influence to bring Hamas to the negotiating table by convincing Hamas leaders to renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist. Shar'a again changed the subject, arguing that Syria was always "totally against the Taliban," but that Hamas and Hizballah are different. Hamas and Hizballah, he said, never went to the U.S. to attack Americans and are only concerned about Israeli-occupied territory. If they had attacked Americans, Shar'a claimed, Syria "would clearly stand against them. But if they attack Israel, we cannot." He said that after Israel had attacked Syria in 2007, Syria did not respond for fear of sparking a "total war." Shar'a complained that instead of applauding Syria's restraint, both Arabs and the White House

had criticized Syria in the wake of the Israeli raid on al-Kibar. Calling it a sign of Syrian good faith, Senator Kerry commended Shar'a for not inciting Palestinians to launch revenge attacks after the recent war in Gaza. Shar'a said that Syria could have been more helpful in restoring peace to Gaza "if Egypt had not demanded a monopoly on the cease fire negotiations."

19. (C) Senator Kerry agreed that Hamas and Hizballah are different from the Taliban, but countered that Hamas and Hizballah, unlike the Taliban, represent a real threat to peace in Syria. The Senator warned Shar'a not to waste time playing games with semantics as the "window on a two-state solution is closing." Shar'a protested that it was the Israelis and not the Lebanese or Palestinians who were undermining the peace process, and accused Senator Kerry of using his trip to Gaza to criticize the Palestinians. Senator Kerry told Shar'a that Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat had been "very pleased" with his remarks in Gaza and asked Shar'a exactly what he had said that the Vice President found offensive. Shar'a admitted that he didn't remember exactly what the Senator had said. (Note: Al-Jazeera highlighted Kerry's remarks regarding Qassam rockets in its reporting on the Senator's visit to Gaza; Shar'a may have been alluding to that coverage. End note.)

110. (C) Senator Kerry asserted that the Obama Administration would be a fair broker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and would insist that Israeli settlement activity must stop. Shar'a asked if that included settlement of the Golan as well as the West Bank and the Senator repeated his answer that settlement must stop. Shar'a asked if the U.S. would assist Syria in supporting a Palestinian national unity government, even if such a government included Hamas, and the Senator told him that George Mitchell had said just two days ago that the U.S. would indeed support Palestinian unity, and if the Palestinians chose to include Hamas the U.S. would work with the unity government. Shar'a recalled that when Binyamin Netanyahu had last been Prime Minister of Israel, he had accepted the principle of talking with the Syrians about the border of June 4, 1967, through a third party -- the American businessman Ron Lauder. "We want our territory

back," he said. "We have principals, but we are flexible."

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Cautious Optimism Over Iraq  
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¶10. (C) Shar'a said that Syria is ready to cooperate in the interests of Iraq's "unity, stability and independence." He expressed Syria's "deep concern" over the security situation in Iraq and the lack of a coherent domestic policy. He acknowledged that federalism in Iraq is not "as questionable and controversial as it was four or five years ago," and assessed that a non-sectarian Iraqi federation was more likely now to succeed. When asked about foreign fighters, Shar'a feigned ignorance of Syria's facilitation of foreign fighter networks into Iraq. Senator Kerry acknowledged that Syrian security services had arrested some al-Qaeda operatives, but asserted that the U.S. wanted Syria to do more.

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Message to President Obama  
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¶11. (C) Shar'a concluded by asking Senator Kerry to "tell President Obama and Secretary Clinton that Syria is open for a full dialogue with the U.S. on all issues. Mutual respect and common interests are the foundation." Senator Kerry urged Shar'a to look for the U.S. to be a true fair broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a sign of the new Administration's policy in the region. He advised Shar'a that the new Administration will be watching Syria's role in the upcoming Lebanese elections and in the international effort to help the Palestinians to achieve national unity. He warned Shar'a that Special Envoy George Mitchell will be coming, and that Syria should be ready for him. "We can turn this region around," he said, "with your help. And we don't need a long timetable." Shar'a responded, "I completely

agree."

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Participation  
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¶12. (SBU) USA:  
Senator John Kerry (D-MA)  
Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly  
SFRC Chief Counsel Frank Lowenstein  
SFRC Policy Advisor Perry Cammack  
LCDR Greg Kausner, U.S. Navy  
Mrs. Teresa Heinz Kerry  
PAO Katherine Van de Vate  
Notetaker Andrew Abell

Syrian Arab Republic:  
Vice President Faruq Shar'a  
Presidential Advisor Buthaina Shaaban  
Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad  
Ambassador Imad Mustapha

¶13. (SBU) CODEL Kerry cleared this message.  
CONNELLY